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The Price of a Child: How China's One-Child Policy Affected Marriage & Family Life (Third Place)

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The Price of a Child: How China's One-Child Policy Affected Marriage & Family Life

For over three decades in China, the terms “brother” and “sister” ceased to exist for many children. Why? Starting in 1982 and lasting until 2015, the Chinese government limited each family to birthing only one child in order to control its booming population. Little did the Chinese government know, this decision not only slowed the birth rate of children, but it also completely altered the family structure in China. One notable change in the family structure was with marriages and bearing children. Due to the one-child policy, many couples in China stopped forming families out of romantic love and instead structured families based on political, social, and economic reasons; in turn, the Chinese government diminished the greater good of its people by limiting their marital jurisdiction.

For thousands of years, arranged marriages set up by the parents of the children were the norm in both the Eastern and Western hemispheres (Coontz 53). The children rarely had a say in the matter because the parents were supposed to make the best decision for the family as a whole, not the best decision for their individual child. Thus, arranging marriages was a means for families to increase their political, social, and economic status. Political reasons for marriage included maintaining the family name and upholding the political control within the family. Stephanie Coontz describes how, “...kings, pharaohs, emperors, and nobles all relied on personal and family ties to recruit and reward followers, make alliances, and establish their legitimacy

(53). In order to sustain dominance over multiple generations, people with political power knew they had to be smart about who they married and who their family members married.

Social reasons for marriage primarily pertained to a family in a lower or middle level class looking to marry their child to somebody in an upper class to gain connections for the family. Stephanie Coontz reiterates that, “Many families voluntarily offered their daughters or sisters to rulers with the aim of gaining a useful connection” (56). In this scenario, the chance to gain status in society was more important than the satisfaction of the person actually marrying.

Besides political and social reasons, economic motives for marriage typically involved an upper-class family looking to control their wealth within the family or a lower to middle class family looking to gain more wealth. For the former, political rulers needed a strong network of supporters to help them fund diplomatic, military, or commercial investments (Coontz 54). If a ruler, for example, wanted to build his military or needed a loan, he could offer up his daughter in marriage to the prince of a nearby kingdom; the two kingdoms could become allies and support each other economically if need be. Families without much money, on the other hand, were quick to offer up their children to wealthy families in order to simply support themselves financially.

Few people prior to the sixteenth century questioned the concept of the arranged marriage process because it was tradition and the norm of the times. Beginning around the sixteenth century, however, an increase in individualistic thought among young people propelled them to defy the authority of their parents. In turn, many young adults began to marry out of romantic love rather than marry for political, social, or economic reasons.

Several factors contributed to more people taking a rebellious mindset towards their parents in regards to marriage. The biggest factor was the new political and philosophical ideas that sprang from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Coontz 146). The Enlightenment

helped produce political theorists who challenged the precedents put forth by their ancestors (Coontz 146). As Stephanie Coontz explains, "...influential thinkers across Europe championed individual rights and insisted that social relationships, including those between men and women, be organized on the basis of reason and justice rather than force" (146). Critical thinkers realized that the most 'reasonable' type of marriage was one based on living a happy life rather than one that will produce the greatest amount of money for the family.

Like all new proposals, many tried to resist the change from arranged marriage to romantic love as the catalyst for marriage. Critics claimed that the privilege of free choice in marriage could be abused and create severe problems in the traditional social hierarchy (Coontz 149). Despite resistance, the changing times forced critics to look at marriage through a different lens. Consequently, romantic love has been the norm in most cultures across the world for the past several centuries, including China. In China, though, the number of people who married out of romantic love declined after the government implemented its one-child policy.

After World War II until the late 1970's, the fertility rates in China were rapidly increasing and the government decided they needed to do something about it (Greenhalgh 10). If they continued to allow people to bear as many children as they like, the population could grow to an unstable rate, leaving millions of people homeless and/or hungry (Greenhalgh 10). Hence, three separate entities proposed possible solutions to the overpopulation problem. One solution, derived from Marxian statistics, suggested the rapid elimination of third-births and gradual increase in first births among families (Greenhalgh 25). Another idea was borrowed from the Western Club of Rome school and implied that the only solution to slow the population crisis was limiting each family to one child (Greenhalgh 25). A third proposal strongly recommended a two child policy in which the families spaced out the birth of each child over a longer period of

time (Greenhalgh 25). Consequently, the government had to weigh the pros and cons of each argument.

Each policy had positive and negative connotations. The first policy allowed families to raise two children, which allows families more freedom than limiting them to one child. Trying to force families who do not want to have children to have a child, though, could prove problematic. The second policy proposed could substantially help the overpopulation problem in the quickest amount of time by limiting each family to one child. Drawbacks to the second policy will be discussed thoroughly in this paper. Finally, the third policy granted families freedom to have both a boy and a girl—much like the first policy—and did not try to force families that do not want children to have a child. Drawbacks to this policy were that it would take the longest to see a decrease in population and it would be the hardest of the three policies to regulate.

After weighing the pros and cons of each proposal, the Chinese government, headed by Deng Xiaoping, decided that the one child policy proposed by the Western Club of Rome school would be the best means of controlling the population (Greenhalgh 25). So in 1982, the Chinese government officially adopted the one-child policy (McLoughlin 307). Families that attempted to cheat the system received harsh punishments, while those that followed the policy received incentives (McLoughlin 307). The punishment and incentive system in place drove people to reconsider marrying a partner based on romantic love, as many individuals felt that they could not create the family they want with only one child (McLoughlin 307). As a result, people turned back to traditional motives for marriage, including for political, social, and economic gain.

Per traditional practices in China, a son is preferred over a daughter in socioeconomic and cultural contexts (Xia, Wang, Do, Qin 263). A son is expected to provide significant financial support and physical care for his parents, while the daughter typically joins her spouse

to help take care of her parent's in-law (263). Especially in rural areas, aging parents rely heavily on their sons to keep up with work in the fields when the parents can no longer work (263). Also, a son carries on the family name, while having a daughter who is the only child would end the family lineage (263). For these reasons, many Chinese families have illegally received abortions on female fetuses to ensure that they have boy (263). Even though the Chinese government banned pregnancy screenings to determine the sex of a baby in 1994, the percentage of males and females in 2011 was 51.27% to 48.73% respectively (263). These statistics are staggering considering that in most cultures the number of females is greater than the number of men; if the birth rates in China were normal, they would have about 66 million more girls born each year than men (Baer).

An unfortunate consequence to the imbalance in the number of men compared to women is that millions of men looking to marry will not be able to find a wife. According to Drake Baer, China has 20 million more men than women. Of the men aged 25-29—the prime age group to marry in most countries—more than 33% are unmarried, while less than 20% of women in the same age group are unmarried. Estimates imply that by 2050 there would be about 186 single men looking to marry every 100 women had China not revised its one-child policy in 2015. By limiting families to one child, China caused a massive gender imbalance that put a lot prevented many men from marrying, which means the government failed to consider the greater good of its citizens.

One practical reason for marriage for some Han-ethnic individuals involved marrying a minority for the opportunity to have more than one child. Although the one-child policy was to be enforced nationwide, local provisional governments were allowed to develop policies based on specific local needs (Huang & Zhou 2). In general, predominately minority communities were given more leeway on policies than majority Han communities because of considerations of

equality among the ethnicities in China (Huang & Zhou 2). Hence, in over one third of the provinces in China, couples with at least one minority member were typically allowed to have more than one child (Huang & Zhou 2). Areas dominated by ethnic minorities were mostly rural communities that simply needed more bodies to help work in the fields (Huang & Zhou 5). In this manner, the one child policy proved effective in the sense that the groups that needed more than one child the most were able to bend the rules. Additionally, the provinces where the policy was heavily enforced were mainly urban and suburban areas in which the need to raise more than one child was not as urgent.

Wi Huang and Yi Zhou conducted a study on the effects of the one-child policy on interracial marriage and discovered some intriguing results. First and foremost, they concluded that the number of interracial marriages in China increased from less than 2% in the 1960's to over 4% in the early 2000's (6). That means that the number of interracial marriages more than doubled in the decades after the one-child policy was enforced in 1982. Also, the Chinese government decided to implement stricter policies in the 1990's for people who broke the restrictions (7). For example, one province raised the fine for breaking the child-bearing policy from one year's income to five in 1992, another province from two to five year's income in 1998, and another from one to two year's income in 1989 (7). Therefore, individuals set on bearing more than one child were less inclined to attempt to break the rules and hide from authorities.

Furthermore, in certain provinces, the children of interethnic couples received preferential treatment compared to Han-ethnic children (10). According to the policy of ethnic identification in China, a child can choose to identify as the ethnicity of either of his parents (10). By identifying as a minority, children enjoyed privileges in areas such as education and employment (10). For example, Huang and Zhou found that minority students on average

enjoyed an extra 20 points on College Placement Exams, or about 3% of the entire score (10). So besides the opportunity to have more than one child, stricter policies and the privileges enjoyed by interethnic children added more incentive for Han-ethnic individuals to marry a minority. Whatever the reason, a Han-ethnic individual marrying a person simply for the opportunity to have more children and provide their children greater advantages means they are not marrying out of romantic love.

For provinces that did not allow exceptions to the one-child policy, some families still intentionally gave birth to two children. Any child born after the first child would be at a big disadvantage. If they did not have a birth permit for the child, the child would not receive equal access to schooling, housing, welfare, or job opportunities (Xia, Wang, Do, Qin 262). For example, Shanghai only provides insurance for families with one child (262). In addition, girls from one-child families will be given an average of 10 extra points on college placement exams (262). A third example is that families with only one child were granted priority in taking out loans and receiving land allowances (262). These incentives for families with only one child put other families in tough situations, which hurt the greater good of Chinese society.

Another thing about families with multiple children is that most of them lived in constant fear of potential punishments they would face if they were caught. Shen Lu and Katie Hunt note that the average fine for giving birth to a second child in a province with the one-child policy is around 200,000 yuan (\$31,250). Also, obtaining a birth permit for a second child in an agrarian society typically costs about 40,000 yuan (\$6,300). Both of these respective fines are far too expensive for hard-working lower to middle class individuals in a communist state like China. One woman, Feng Jianmei, was forced to have an abortion in the seventh month of her pregnancy because her husband Deng Jiyuan could not afford to pay the fine to obtain a birth permit. Deng voiced his displeasure of the incident: “‘I’m angry and want justice. They forced

her to abort our seven-month-old child—do they deserve to be called Communist Party officials who served the people?’” (Lu and Hunt). Deng hit the nail on the head; by implementing harsh penalties to individuals who break the rules, the Chinese government hurt the overall well-being of its people.

A story published by the Washington Post featured other examples of punishments handed out by the government for rule breakers of the one-child policy. One woman who resided in the southern Hunan province was forcefully injected with a shot after the police barged into her house without consent. She was pregnant with her second child, and local officials were determined to kill the baby. Less than ten hours later, the woman gave birth to a boy; the local officials promptly put the baby in a bag and buried him on a nearby hill. The woman’s husband described the incident by stating, “‘They grabbed my wife’s body like they were grabbing a pig, four or five people holding her hands and legs and head, and injected a shot into her belly. Neither my wife nor I signed any consent form’” (Denyer). His description makes it sound like the government wanted people to avoid having more than one child out of pure fear.

In a separate incident, a woman fled her home with her two daughters to avoid indictment (Denyer). Authorities on a local family-planning team arrived at the woman’s house looking to punish her, only to learn that the woman had fled her home. The woman’s 80-year-old mother was the only one in the house, yet the authorities decided to start tearing down the house right in front of the mother. After authorities destroyed furniture and spoiled food, the woman’s mother began to cry. A member of the family-planning team reported afterwards, “I can never forget the scene: an 80-year-old woman crying in front of her ruined house, sitting on a stone in tears. It’s like it just happened yesterday. I couldn’t bear it anymore and resigned from the family-planning team” (Denyer). By instructing local officials to punish rule breakers of the one-child policy, the

actions performed by the authorities often scarred both the authorities and victims in a physical and mental way.

In many ways, the sociological effect that the one-child policy had on only-children was the worst result of the one-child policy. Caven S Mcloughlin notes how a man named Lin Chong De conducted a study on children in China in the 1980's that compared children with siblings and children without siblings (309). De discovered that children without siblings were more prone to, "willfulness, lack of sympathy, thriftlessness, and self-centeredness" (309). He inferred that children without siblings have these traits because they are more accommodated for their wants and needs from their parents than children with siblings, who have to share their parents' attention with their siblings (309). Albeit a generalization, in a country with over one billion people the total number of children that will demonstrate self-centeredness will be higher than in countries with less people.

Multiple other studies conducted on Chinese children raised in the 1980's suggest that children without siblings tended to be more selfish and egotistical than children with siblings (309). The parents cannot be blamed for giving all of their attention to their only child because the law prohibited them from giving their child siblings. China's long-run stability depends on their generation of only-children, so the greater good of the country in the future faces a crisis because of a generation of more self-centered individuals.

After over three decades after it was implemented in 1982, China's Communist Party announced on October 29, 2015, that the one-child policy would be changed to a two-child policy, effective on January 1, 2016 (Denyer). According to demographer Lu Jiehua, the new policy is expected to spark a new baby-boom in 2017 and 2018 (Denyer). Although the policy has changed, for many individuals the heartache caused by the policy will never go away.

Experiences of forced abortions, governmental oppression, and turmoil among families will stick with this generation of only-children forever.

When all was said and done, the Chinese government failed to consider the greater good of its people when implementing the one-child policy. People began establishing families on the basis of financial and social stability instead of personal attraction, or romantic love. On top of that, the ratio of men to women in China is currently 116 to 100, respectively, which has created an enormous crisis for men in their twenties and thirties looking to marry (Lu and Hunt). China's one-child policy was indeed effective in preventing over-population in the world's most populous country. The policy, however, ruined the future of millions of men looking to marry who statistically will not be able to find a wife, women who were aborted because their parents wanted a male child, and families who were torn apart by such events. Now the future of China lies in the hands of a severely gender-imbalanced generation that was raised by parents who valued wealth and stability in their families over personal attraction.

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